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ABSTRACT

This document presents criteria that are designed to help a media reviewer examine professional presentations of middle-level education, gauging how closely a presentation reflects prevailing educational philosophy. Ten key features of middle-level schooling are highlighted, and a Likert scale is provided for each. The 10 features include varied instructional strategies, interdisciplinary team organization, interdisciplinary curriculum, learning-to-learn skills, exploratory and elective courses, scheduling, school climate, cocurricular activities, advisement and counseling, and heterogeneous student grouping. Each scale is prefaced by a synopsis that describes the feature. An overview of middle-level educational philosophy and purposes is also included, which points out that middle-level education emphasizes academic, personal, social, health, and moral guidance specifically tailored for students in the young adolescent phase of their development. Middle-level education is characterized by concerns for the whole child, equity, strong student-adult relationships, and teacher collegiality and empowerment. Finally, because all aspects of middle-level schools derive from the varying developmental needs of its young adolescent clientele, all aspects of middle-level schools must be flexible, dynamic, and adaptive to local conditions. (LMI)

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California League

of Middle Schools

ED 361 906

SCREENING CRITERIA
FOR
PROFESSIONAL MEDIA PRESENTATIONS
ON
MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION

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ON
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December, 1990

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INTRODUCTION TO SCREENING CRITERIA

These criteria are intended to help a media reviewer examine professional presentations on middle level education, gauging how closely a presentation reflects prevailing educational philosophy.

Ten key features of middle level schooling are highlighted, and a Likert scale is provided for each. Each scale is prefaced by an synopsis describing the feature, to aid reviewers in establishing a mind set for using the rating scale.

Unless the reviewer is intimately familiar with middle level education, time will be needed to absorb the synopsis and rating items on each feature. It may prove more practical to complete the ratings *after* a media presentation is viewed, particularly if more than one of the ten features is covered.

Concepts and descriptions in this instrument are drawn from the literature on middle level education. Listed below are some sources which can expand and refine the reviewer's acquaintance with middle level philosophy.

William Alexander and Paul S. George, *The Exemplary Middle School* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981).

Superintendent's Middle Grade Task Force, *Caught in the Middle* (Sacramento: California State Department of Education, 1987).

Sara Lake, *Practitioner's Monographs on Middle Level Education* (Sacramento: California League of Middle Schools, 1988 -).

Task Force on the Education of Young Adolescents, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989).

OVERVIEW ON MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION PHILOSOPHY AND PURPOSES

From the beginning of this century, it has been recognized that young adolescents (aged approximately 10-14) have educational needs which are different from those of younger and older children. Educators have sought to develop a unique program for this age group.

Their first attempt was the junior high school, implemented around 1910. Directly modeled on the high school, the junior high school featured departmentalized, lecture-based teaching and a social atmosphere attuned to older adolescents.

By the late 1950s, many educators were questioning the appropriateness of this school design to the students being served. They began advocating "middle schools" as a new model. No longer an imitation high school, the middle school would be a new "third tier" of schooling between elementary and secondary (high school) education. This tier would be distinct from the other two, yet would serve as a transition, or bridge, between them, just as puberty is a bridge for each person between childhood and adolescence.

Elementary education is designed to meet the needs of young children: it offers secure, one-teacher, adult-directed classrooms with limited student initiative. Elementary schools nurture children in small, family-like groups, but high schools are very different: they treat students in a much more "adult" fashion. A high school student is expected to be a responsible individual, capable of maneuvering through a large setting, meeting with various teachers, and completing independent work. Student independence and autonomy are encouraged both in academic and social life.

The traditional junior high school moves students abruptly from the elementary to the secondary model at the beginning of seventh grade. The new model "middle level school" is designed to extend this transition over three years, in carefully planned stages lasting from sixth through eighth grade. Multi-period core curriculum classes, for example, offer some of the remembered security of single-teacher elementary classrooms, while increasing use of independent work and departmentalized electives prepare students for the atmosphere they will find in high school.

The transitions young adolescents make are not just between two modes of schooling. They are experiencing one of the most critical phases of life--moving from childhood into adulthood. Rapid physical and emotional change make this an unsteady period for most youngsters. As a recent Carnegie report confirms, these years are a "turning point." Youngsters are setting the academic, social, health, and moral patterns they will carry into adulthood. Wrong choices made in these years can have long-term ramifications.

The middle level school, therefore, emphasizes guidance: academic guidance to help each student prepare for the widest possible options in high school and all future schooling; personal, social, and health guidance to assist each youngster through the changes of puberty; and moral example and support to enhance each child's character and feelings of self-worth, thereby laying a foundation for productive adulthood.

Thus, a middle level school has two purposes: to help students make (1) the academic transition between elementary school and high school and (2) the personal transition between childhood and young adulthood. Academic excellence and positive personal development are equally important goals. The middle level school most particularly stresses concern for the "whole child."

Another crucial goal is equity. Like all children of this age, minority and at-risk youngsters are setting lifelong patterns during the middle years. They must benefit equally from all the opportunities and encouragement the middle level school has to offer.

A school that gives such weight to students' personal and moral development must be founded on strong human relationships. Middle level teachers and administrators play a key role as models and mentors at this level, providing a counter-balance to the rapidly-developing peer culture of adolescence. Student-adult relationships are extremely important. So too are adult-adult relationships, which set the example. Staff relationships must be respectful and personally enhancing. Teacher empowerment, collegiality, and professionalism are not just management techniques in a middle level school; they help set the school's emotional and moral tone.

All aspects of middle level schooling derive from the developmental needs of its young adolescent clientele. Because these needs are varied and ever-changing, with individuals maturing at different rates, all aspects of middle level schooling must be flexible, adaptive to local conditions, and dynamic in meeting change.

VARIED INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

SYNOPSIS

Traditional secondary school instruction consists primarily of lecture and reading. This is considered inappropriate for middle level students because it fails to account for their developmental needs.

Physically, middle level students are restless because of their rapidly changing bodies. Curiosity is high, but attention spans are short. Active, hands-on strategies and movement around the classroom take advantage of this excess energy in ways that passive seatwork cannot. Variation of activities can engage curiosity and compensate for short attention spans.

Intellectually, students are moving from the concrete into the formal stage of thinking in which they can manage abstract concepts and metacognition. Strategies that foster higher order thinking and reflection, lessons that specifically move students from the concrete to the abstract, help in this development.

Socially, middle level students are fascinated with their peers. Paired and small group activities use this preoccupation for constructive learning.

Emotionally, students are beginning to seek autonomy from adults and can be helped by strategies that offer carefully graduated levels of independence, choice, and responsibility.

Traditionally-schooled students and teachers may not be familiar with these types of learning strategies. Therefore, both will need training when these new learning modes are introduced.

VARIED INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

RATING SCALE

In discussing instructional strategies in the middle level school, this media presentation makes the following points:

	Not Mentioned	Mentioned	Stressed
The use of varied strategies derives from the developmental needs of this age group.	1	2	3
Instruction emphasizes activity, engagement, variety, concrete aids, peer interaction, problem solving.	1	2	3
Higher order thought and metacognition are encouraged.	1	2	3
Students are given an appropriate level of choice and responsibility.	1	2	3
When a new instructional strategy is introduced, students are taught their role in it.	1	2	3
Teachers receive training, practice, and coaching in new teaching skills.	1	2	3

COMMENTS:

INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM ORGANIZATION

SYNOPSIS

There are two basic requirements for interdisciplinary team organization in the middle level school: (1) team members have the time and opportunity to engage in joint planning and (2) they share a common group of students. These requirements foster the two major goals of team organization: teacher collegiality and a sense of "belonging" for students.

Team organization involves two or more (usually not more than six) teachers in delivering some or all of the core curriculum to a common group of students in an extended time block. Team members are empowered to jointly plan instructional delivery, use of time, and their dealings with students. Teaming in the sense of joint or interdisciplinary teaching is not required, but is strongly encouraged.

Team organization benefits teachers by ending their isolation, enhancing communication, and supporting them in collegial planning. Team organization benefits students by creating a smaller, closer "learning community" in which several adults are directly concerned with a particular group of students. Student anonymity is diminished.

Shifting to team organization may require extensive training, since most teachers were taught to operate under norms of autonomy and isolation, not collegiality and cooperation.

INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM ORGANIZATION

RATING SCALE

In discussing interdisciplinary team organization in the middle level school, this media presentation makes the following points:

	Not Mentioned	Mentioned	Stressed
Team teachers (1) have a joint planning time and (2) share responsibility for a common group of students.	1	2	3
Interdisciplinary team organization is distinct from, but closely related to, interdisciplinary curriculum.	1	2	3
Team organization empowers teachers as professionals.	1	2	3
Team organization also benefits students, by reducing anonymity.	1	2	3
Team organization will require many teachers to shift from existing professional norms of isolation and autonomy.	1	2	3

COMMENTS:

INTERDISCIPLINARY CURRICULUM

SYNOPSIS

Interdisciplinary study helps middle level students see meaningful connections between their various academic subjects. It gives them a chance to practice thinking, study, and language skills across the curriculum. Enhanced meaning and skills practice in new settings should encourage students' reflective thought and motivation to learn.

Ideally, interdisciplinary curriculum is delivered by an interdisciplinary team organization, but special in-class or school-wide thematic units are another option.

The simplest model of interdisciplinary teaching is "correlation," by which teachers of different subjects coordinate their separate classes around particular themes, topics, or learning skills. In a "fused" model, two or more subjects are taught at one time. "Problem focused" teaching truly dissolves the boundaries between subject disciplines and involves students and teachers in wide-ranging explorations.

While correlation and/or special units can be developed fairly easily within a traditional curriculum, "fused" and "problem focused" teaching require fundamental changes. The former requires development of new courses and either a teacher with multiple subject credentials or a teaching team. Problem focused teaching alters the compartmentalized delivery of academic subjects upon which so much of today's school organization (teacher credentials, Carnegie Units, graduation requirements, textbooks) is based. It requires teachers to shift from being deliverers of subject content to a new role for which few have been trained: facilitator and fellow learner in multi-subject explorations.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CURRICULUM

RATING SCALE

In discussing interdisciplinary curriculum in the middle level school, this media presentation makes the following points:

	Not Mentioned	Mentioned	Stressed
Interdisciplinary curriculum helps students to see the connectedness of knowledge and to practice learning skills across the curriculum.	1	2	3
Interdisciplinary curriculum is distinct from, but closely allied to, interdisciplinary team organization.	1	2	3
There are several models for interdisciplinary curriculum.	1	2	3
Different models of interdisciplinary curriculum have different implications for instructional delivery, school organization, and staff development.	1	2	3

COMMENTS:

LEARNING TO LEARN SKILLS

SYNOPSIS

Caught in the Middle states: "Every middle grade student should develop a repertoire of learning strategies and study skills which emphasizes reflective thought and systematic progression toward the goal of independent learning." (p.24)

Every class should include direct instruction in, and the opportunity to practice, Learning to Learn skills. These skills include traditional study techniques, such as reading comprehension, outlining, and time management, but they go beyond this to include skills of cooperative and independent learning, fluent communication, higher order thinking, and the ability to consciously monitor and direct--to take "ownership" of--one's own learning.

During the middle grades, teachers must nurture each student's ability to see the relevance and "payoff" of school work and to be a self-directed, responsible learner. The self-directed learner is an active participant in the learning process, not a passive consumer of teacher directives. The active learner will be able to continue learning throughout life.

Learning to Learn skills and higher order thinking have more meaning when taught in context. They should be integrated across the curriculum, not taught as isolated units or separate classes. Increasing amounts of worthwhile homework and independent/group projects are key techniques for promoting student responsibility and self-direction.

In the name of equity, these valuable Learning to Learn skills must be taught to all students. At-risk students must not be deprived of higher order thinking skills, challenge, and self-direction.

LEARNING TO LEARN SKILLS

RATING SCALE

In discussing Learning to Learn skills in the middle level school, this media presentation makes the following points:

	Not Mentioned	Mentioned	Stressed
Learning to Learn skills involve more than simple study techniques; they let students become active, self-directed learners.	1	2	3
Teachers must develop students' sense of responsibility for their own learning.	1	2	3
Learning to Learn skills should be directly taught and practiced in all classes.	1	2	3
Learning to Learn skills must be taught to all students.	1	2	3

COMMENTS:

EXPLORATORY AND ELECTIVE COURSES

SYNOPSIS

In middle level education, exploratory and elective courses supplement, but never supplant, the academic core curriculum.

Exploratory courses traditionally cover such areas as the arts, home economics, industrial arts, and foreign language. They are basic "survey" courses designed to introduce middle level students to several new fields of knowledge, with the hope of enlivening their interest for further study. They are often required courses, exposing every student to all the different fields.

If exploratory courses widen student horizons, elective courses allow them to develop existing interests and to begin practicing the task of selecting courses, as they will have to do in high school. While exploratory courses are open to--even required of--all students, some electives, such as French II or Advanced Band, may have prerequisites.

Exploratory and elective courses help provide a range of instructional options to students. They are less "formal" than the core curriculum, yet more "academic" than cocurricular offerings. The distinctions should not be too finely drawn, because Core--Exploratory/Elective--Cocurricular is actually a continuum of instructional offerings that must be designed by each school to meet the needs and interests of its student body.

Exploratory and elective courses often develop out of students' and/or teachers' personal interests. This is the most flexible and changeable part of the instructional program. Teachers can offer courses of an experimental nature.

EXPLORATORY AND ELECTIVE COURSES

RATING SCALE

In discussing exploratory and elective courses in the middle level school, this media presentation makes the following points:

	Not Mentioned	Mentioned	Stressed
Exploratory and elective courses supplement, but never supplant, the core curriculum.	1	2	3
Exploratory and elective courses give students a chance to expand their horizons and to learn about making academic choices.	1	2	3
Exploratory and elective courses are a flexible part of the instructional program, often deriving from teacher and student interests.	1	2	3

COMMENTS:

SCHEDULING

SYNOPSIS

A school's master schedule is a concrete expression of its philosophy of education. The way it distributes the school day between the core curriculum, exploratory and elective classes, cocurricular activities, teacher planning time, and the advisory program indicates the value it ascribes to each of these program components.

Like every other feature of middle level education, the master schedule must be flexible and dynamic; it must accommodate, not restrict, the changing needs of students and staff. No student should ever be locked out of a learning opportunity by an inflexible school schedule.

The schedule should provide extended time blocks for the core curriculum, thereby permitting teachers to flexibly employ a variety of teaching strategies, including active learning. Time should be tailored to teaching, not vice versa. Team teachers must also be scheduled for common planning time to facilitate their collegial work.

SCHEDULING RATING SCALE

In discussing scheduling in the middle level school, this media presentation makes the following points:

	Not Mentioned	Mentioned	Stressed
The master schedule is a carefully thought out expression of a school's philosophy and instructional priorities.	1	2	3
The schedule integrates all facets of the middle school program, including advisory and cocurricular activities.	1	2	3
The schedule is dynamic and flexible; if facilitates teaching and learning.	1	2	3
The schedule never bars a student from a learning opportunity.	1	2	3
The schedule allows for extended core classes and teacher planning time.	1	2	3

COMMENTS:

SCHOOL CLIMATE

SYNOPSIS

The climate of a middle level school must be tailored to the special needs of the young adolescent it serves: it must nurture the child (s)he still is, challenge the adult (s)he is becoming, and respect the unique person (s)he is right now. The key phrase in describing middle level school climate is "student-centered."

The general research on effective school climate applies: an orderly, safe, academic environment; high expectations for all students; shared values; and strong leadership. Other qualities repeatedly highlighted in the middle level literature include:

Respect for each individual;

Positive school spirit, enthusiasm, a sense of belonging;

Positive discipline;

Role modeling by adults of high academic and behavior standards;

Multiple opportunities for each student to earn recognition;

Daily encouragement and reassurance of students, a judicious mixture of challenge and support;

Active encouragement of student responsibility and independence;

Continual enhancement of student self esteem, so that each student feels valued.

Climate has much to do with teachers. Good middle level teachers have good human relations skills to begin with, and they care about the "whole child." It is easy for them to be positive and enthusiastic with students because they are themselves made to feel recognized and valued; they are respected and empowered as professionals.

SCHOOL CLIMATE

RATING SCALE

In discussing climate in the middle level school, this media presentation makes the following points:

	Not Mentioned	Mentioned	Stressed
A middle level school is "student-centered" and concerned with the "whole child."	1	2	3
The school's emotional tone is positive.	1	2	3
Individuals have a sense of value, belonging, and personal recognition; students are not anonymous or alienated.	1	2	3
High expectations are evident for both academic achievement and behavior.	1	2	3
Both students and staff are respected, and their self esteem is fostered.	1	2	3

COMMENTS:

COCURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

SYNOPSIS

A strong and varied cocurricular program is essential to middle level education. This program allows students to explore new interests, learn new social and avocational skills, and develop new avenues of pride and achievement. Cocurricular activities give students and teachers a chance to relate to each other in different ways.

The most critical factor in designing a middle level cocurricular program is ensuring access to all students. Fees or lack of transportation should not be barriers to participation. Cocurricular activities should be scheduled within the school day if after school transportation is not available.

Activities should be designed so that any student can enjoy participation. For example, there should be music activities for everyone, not just an orchestra for an elite core of talented musicians. Intramural games open to all students are just as important as interscholastic teams that select the best athletes.

The program should provide a balance of offerings. Some, such as science fairs, reinforce classroom learning. Others, such as music and athletics, foster new skills. Community service projects develop character. Still other activities, such as noon games, are simply fun-filled outlets for youthful energy.

Through a strong student council and other avenues, students should play a meaningful role in managing the cocurricular program. This will help them to develop qualities of leadership, cooperation, and responsibility.

Care should be taken to tailor offerings to students' developmental level. A number of educators express concern that evening dances and interscholastic sports competitions are too "adult" for middle level youngsters.

COCURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

RATING SCALE

In discussing cocurricular activities in the middle level school, this media presentation makes the following points:

	Not Mentioned	Mentioned	Stressed
All students have full access to the cocurricular program, unrestricted by organizational barriers.	1	2	3
The cocurricular program provides a balance of academic, athletic, artistic, and service activities--also fun.	1	2	3
Students have a meaningful role in managing the program.	1	2	3
Activities are geared to students' developmental levels.	1	2	3

COMMENTS:

ADVISEMENT AND COUNSELING

SYNOPSIS

Middle level guidance and counseling involves many formats: traditional counselor-based programs, Teacher Advisor programs, peer counseling, and group advisement curricula geared to students' personal development needs. Academic guidance and counseling helps students plan for their high school future. Personal guidance and counseling addresses their social, emotional, physical, and moral development needs as they go through puberty and begin to practice adult behavior.

Youngsters at this age have a special need for a close, caring, respectful relationship with a school adult. By enlisting teachers as Teacher Advisors, it can be assured that each student has an adult "mentor" and model.

The Teacher Advisor does not supplant the professional counselor, who usually manages the overall program and designs the advisement curriculum. Confusion of teachers' and counselors' roles is a frequent basis for controversy in Teacher Advisor programs. Staff development is crucial to a successful program.

Recognizing the importance of students' personal development, the advisement curriculum is scheduled as a regular part of the school day, often as an advisory period or "homeroom," or as part of the extended time block devoted to the core curriculum.

ADVISEMENT AND COUNSELING

RATING SCALE

In discussing advisement and counseling in the middle level school, this media presentation makes the following points:

	Not Mentioned	Mentioned	Stressed
Middle level students need both academic and personal guidance and counseling.	1	2	3
The guidance and counseling program has many facets, one of which is a Teacher Advisor program.	1	2	3
Teacher Advisor programs stem from the idea that at least one school adult should be in regular, focused contact with each student.	1	2	3
The Teacher Advisor role should not be confused with that of a professional counselor.	1	2	3
Teachers need training in the Teacher Advisor role.	1	2	3
Advisement is to be regularly scheduled into the school day or week.	1	2	3

COMMENTS:

HETEROGENEOUS STUDENT GROUPING

SYNOPSIS

Three key principles of middle level education articulated in *Caught in the Middle* are: a core curriculum for all students, equal access to all offerings, and preparation of each student for the widest possible educational choices in high school. Heterogeneous grouping of students addresses these goals.

In recent years, major research studies have demonstrated that permanent tracks or ability groups are detrimental to "low track" students because they deliver an inferior education that limits future options. Minority and at-risk students are disproportionately assigned to lower tracks.

During the middle grades, a child's future possibilities are just beginning to open, so it is imperative to avoid organizational limitations and restrictions.

Heterogeneous grouping and equal access apply to all students. *Caught in the Middle* states: "Differentiation of the core curriculum on the basis of ethnic, linguistic, or other educationally superficial criteria is fundamentally wrong." (p.59)

Heterogeneous grouping has many implications for instruction and school administration. Homogeneous tracks or ability groups have been the standard model for decades; teachers will have to learn new techniques (and perhaps develop new attitudes), if they are to work productively with heterogeneous classes. Courses will have to be rewritten and the master schedule carefully planned so that students are not blocked from desired courses by unnecessary prerequisites or scheduling conflicts. Chapter 1 and other special programs will have to be aligned to supplement, not supplant, the core curriculum.

HETEROGENEOUS STUDENT GROUPING

RATING SCALE

In discussing heterogeneous grouping in the middle level school, this media presentation makes the following points:

	Not Mentioned	Mentioned	Stressed
Equity and equal access are key goals of middle level education.	1	2	3
All students are assigned to the same core curriculum in heterogeneous groups.	1	2	3
Ability groups are formed only for brief instructional episodes.	1	2	3
Heterogeneous grouping has implications for teaching practices and for school organization.	1	2	3
Categorical and special assistance programs must not supplant the core curriculum for any student.	1	2	3

COMMENTS: